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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000961

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SUBJECT: SYRIAN MISTREATMENT OF POLITICAL PRISONERS
CONTINUES UNABATED

Classified By: CDA Michael Corbin, for reasons 1.4 b/d.

11. (C) Summary. According to a variety of credible human rights contacts, the Syrian regime continues to stonewall requests by Riad Seif, Anwar al-Bunni, Michel Kilo and other high profile political prisoners for medical treatment. In addition, prison officials have stepped up harassment of a prominent human rights lawyer working for several jailed activists. Following the positive European response for demarches regarding Riad Seif, we will comparte notes with European Embassies here and seek additional messages on political prisoners and activists. End Summary.

12. (C) Riad Seif Update: The Syrian government continues to deny Riad Seif permission to travel abroad for medical treatment of his prostate cancer. He told us in a meeting last week he had heard the Europeans were demarching the Syrian government on his behalf but were reluctant to issue a public statement. He said he met German Development Minister Wiczeorek-Zeul during her August 28-29 visit to Damascus, and she informed him that she had raised his case with President Asad. Seif said he had also met with visiting EU parliamentarians who promised to press his case. Seif told us he had subsequently been contacted by Syrian Military Intelligence and offered permission to travel abroad in exchange for a public statement criticizing U.S. human rights abuses (e.g. Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib and policy in Iraq). He refused this deal and commented that it was a sign the government was feeling pressure. He added that he had a two-to-three week supply of hormone treatment remaining. As a last resort, Seif said he might consider crossing the Iraqi border and traveling to Europe for treatment. He thanked us for our efforts and repeated his request for statements by members of Congress with whom he has met.

13. (C) Political Prisoners in Need of Medical Treatment: On September 19, Poloffs met with the wife, Raghida, and brother, Akram, of imprisoned civil society activist and human rights lawyer Anwar al-Bunni. Both Raghida and Akram said that Anwar was suffering from acute rheumatism in his leg. To make matters worse, prison regulations mandate the assignment of bunks based on seniority (i.e., length of time served in prison), which prison officials cite to prevent Anwar from occupying a lower bunk. Currently, Anwar is assigned an upper bunk, a place he can only reach with extreme difficulty given his rheumatism. Akram said he had been able to arrange a telephone conversation between a doctor and his brother, which resulted in a prescription for medicine that had helped some. The doctor has been unable to examine Anwar in person. Akram said he and a lawyer had

requested a meeting with the Minister of Justice to request doctor access and a lower bunk, but thus far the SARG response has been to feign ignorance.

¶4. (C) Two other political prominent prisoners continue to require urgent medical care that has thus far been refused. 67-year-old author Michel Kilo has been in prison since May ¶2006. He has since developed a nerve problem in his arm which causes him pain and remains untreated. 64- year-old Aref Dalila has been in prison since 2001 when he was imprisoned with Riad Seif and others during the crackdown on the Damascus Spring. His heart condition not changed and the SARG continues to refuse him treatment.

¶5. (C) Intimidation of Prominent Human Rights Lawyer: The SARG is also intimidating one of the most prominent lawyers representing political prisoners. On September 19, President of the Syrian Human Rights Organization Muhanad al-Hasani, and legal representative of Kilo, Bunni, Dalila, and imprisoned political reformer Kamal Labwani told us that he recently met with these jailed activists to discuss their mistreatment. As Hasani was leaving the prison, guards detained him for over an hour, threatened him physically, and seized his notes detailing the prison mistreatment of political prisoners. (Hasani noted that under Syrian law, lawyers are normally allowed to take notes and/or receive statements from their clients in prison.) Later in the day, Hasani,s office in Damascus was surrounded by police who tried to remove the nameplate from above his office.

¶6. (C) Comment: We plan to highlight these incidents in our 2007 Human Rights Report, but unilateral pressure has yielded limited results. We believe that European demarches on human rights cases have annoyed SARG officials who are focused on

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the possibility of expanding economic and development ties. In concert with the Europeans here, we will seek to develop messages for European capitals on the SARG's continued intransigence regarding mistreatment and denial of medical attention.
CORBIN